



# 1 World Connected

Data-driven Research to Bring Billions Online

## EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES: REACHING THE UNREACHED

PROVIDING GOVERNMENT SERVICES AND SKILLS TRAINING  
IN RURAL BHUTAN



*Community Center in Bhutan, Image Credit: SAARC Development Fund*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

In 2012, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Development Fund (SDF), in collaboration with the Department of Information Technology and Telecom of the Government of Bhutan, launched the Empowering Rural Communities: Reaching the Unreached project. With a budget of \$2.53 million, the project aims to generate new employment opportunities using contemporary ICTs and ensure citizens in the rural areas of SAARC countries can access government services. In Bhutan, the plan called for the construction of 60 community centers and trained 50 community center operators to staff the locations as well.

*Keywords: digital literacy, e-governance, rural, Bhutan*

## CONTEXT

---

The objective of Bhutan's five-year development plan is self-reliance and green, inclusive socio-economic development, and the outcomes are defined at the national, sectoral, and Dzongkhag (administrative and judicial district) levels. Government to Citizen Services (G2C) was initiated in 2010 to increase efficiency and transparency in public service delivery through the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). Online services are made available through 131 community centers (CCs) connected to the Internet. Under the National Broadband Master plan project, fiber optic cables have currently reached all 20 Dzongkhags and 201 Gewogs (group of villages). The South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Information Highway Project is installing high bandwidth connectivity directly to India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. More than 96 government organizations are connected through the Thimphu Wide Area Network (TWAN) as well. Of the 200 CCs that have been established, 187 CCs have broadband Internet connectivity while the remaining will be connected by 2018. Computers are being made freely accessible to some rural communities to facilitate learning, and an information technology (IT) park was established in Babesa in 2011.

<b>Bhutan</b>			
<b>Population (UN, 2015)</b>	776,462	<b>Fixed broadband subscriptions (%) (ITU, 2016)</b>	3.94
<b>Population density (people per sq.km) (UN, 2015)</b>	16.52	<b>Mobile cellular subscriptions (%) (ITU, 2016)</b>	88.78
<b>Median household income (Gallup, 2006-2012)</b>	N/A	<b>Individuals using the Internet (%) (ITU, 2016)</b>	41.8
<b>Education (Mean years of schooling) (UNDP, 2013)</b>	N/A	<b>Individuals using the Internet by Gender (%) (ITU, 2016)</b>	N/A

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

---

Conceived in 2011 and launched in April 2013, the SAARC Development Funds' Empowering Rural Communities: Reaching the Unreached project targets the rural areas of four countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives. In each case, the SDF's aim was to generate employment opportunities for the region and use ICTs to foster the growth of commerce and entrepreneurship. In the case of Bhutan, \$2.53 million dollars was allocated for the construction of 50 community centers intended to service 18 of the 20 Bhutanese Dzongkhags. Beyond providing training and connectivity to rural villagers, the community centers also aim to offer residents with more access to services provided by the Bhutanese government. The community centers are hoped to lessen the turn-around time when citizens communicate with governmental bodies, and can help with tasks that are made difficult by remote or rural locations (e.g., taking passport-size photos). The government seeks to roll this out to all community centers nationwide

<b>Project details</b>			
<b>Technology</b>	Internet-connected community centers	<b>Training</b>	50 community center operators are trained to provide training at the community centers
<b>Year program started</b>	2013	<b>Cost to users</b>	Free
<b>Geography</b>	Steep mountains, subtropical plains, deep valleys	<b>Total cost of program</b>	US\$ 2.53 million
<b>User profile</b>	60 community centers	<b>Associated organizations</b>	SAARC

## PROGRESS AND RESULTS

---

Initially, community centers in 50 Gewogs were established under the project, but thanks to savings in the project fund, CCs in 10 additional Gewogs were established – meaning 60 CCs that were funded by SDF in total. The SDF trained 50 community center operators to staff the locations as well. Following the completion of the project, the Bhutanese government promised its citizens that it will open a community center in each of the country's 205 Gewogs.

As the community centers prosper, new services are being integrated into the existing repertoire of offerings. One emerging business model is for individuals to conduct banking at the community centers via the Internet. Many banks have already signed on, and more and more community centers will be included, as it is a feasible model.

In terms of commerce, a similar project is in the works to provide each community center with a unique webpage allowing residents of the Gewogs to sell local crafts and merchandise online. It is also hoped that these sites can showcase the unique culture of specific areas and boost tourism.

The community centers help to equalize the knowledge bases of students between the urban and rural communities as well. Some community centers are teaching rural children computer basics during school breaks, and these centers have requested more computers because there is considerable interest. Adults, monks, and laypeople also attend computer trainings and in some centers, they are being taught Dzongkhag Unicode.

While the success of the ICT intervention for rural Bhutanese citizens is paramount, the community centers also offer useful offline services as well. The services most taken advantage of by citizens are photocopying, taking passport photos, and legal stamps.

## CHALLENGES

---

**Lack of skilled manpower** – Because a community center only has a single qualified operator, the community suffers when this individual is unavailable. Financial limitations have also made it impossible to increase the number of operators per community center.

**Lack of access to devices** – User feedback indicated that more computer systems are needed at the locations, specifically to increase the number of community members that could take basic computer classes.

## SDF'S SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

---

**Offline services at community centers can aid take-up** - Villagers in rural areas of Bhutan can sell goods, encourage tourism, and interact with the larger world. The community centers also serve a second purpose beyond providing technology and know-how. The public has made good use of the offline services offered by the community centers, including the photocopiers.

**Partnership with government is beneficial**– The success of the Bhutan segment of the project is indicative of the project's scalability. In Bhutan, the government has already taken steps to scale the project by constructing community centers in other Gewogs as well.

**Cultural specificity should be taken into account** - While the Bhutanese case was particularly successful, other similar projects were impeded by a variety of causes. In Nepal and the Maldives, governmental unreliability reportedly hampered the success of the projects. In advance of launching a pilot, it is recommended to consider geographically specific cultural and governmental frameworks.

## SOURCES

---

Lhaki, L. (2017, June 26) Personal Interview

Project website: <http://www.sdfsec.org/?q=node/344>

Project video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrQyufM3p6w&feature=youtu.be>